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## Buying local votes? Campaign spending effects in Belgian local elections

*06 Monday Oct 2014*

POSTED BY INLOGOV IN DEMOCRACY REPRESENTATION AND PARTICIPATION

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*Bart Maddens, Belgium, Election campaign, Gert-Jan Put, Jef Smulders, local elections, Local Government Studies*

Gert-Jan Put, Bart Maddens and Jef Smulders

In democratic countries worldwide, elections are being organized on an increasingly larger scale. This makes it more challenging for political parties and candidates to communicate with voters and reach their target groups. Alternatively, they resort to mass media and costly electoral campaigns, for which parties and candidates are often prepared to spend exorbitant amounts of money.

Research on campaign spending in general elections has shown that these investments do matter, especially for political challengers: by raising personal expenses, challengers are able to close the gap with incumbent candidates. The latter group enjoys the obvious advantage of their office, which provides them with more (campaign) visibility and organizational capacity. As a result, spending is significantly less effective for them than for challengers, who need to compensate their lower visibility with more expensive campaigns. This incumbency effect is confirmed in majoritarian electoral systems such as the US, UK, Sweden and Canada, but also in some proportional systems such as Ireland and Belgium.

But local elections are of course a different story compared to general elections. In these smaller-scale electoral contests, voters are more familiar with candidates because of their closer geographical proximity. This changes the nature of the electoral competition and campaigning: voters will be more inclined to cast personal votes, candidates use different campaign techniques and the media plays a more limited role.

Does this imply that campaign spending effects will also be different in these elections? Is it worthwhile to invest a huge amount of personal resources in local campaigns? Does it increase the number of preference votes a candidate receives, and more importantly, does it raise one's odds of getting elected? In our recent article in Local Government Studies, we address these questions and examine the effect of individual campaign spending on the results of local election candidates.

The article focuses on the case of the Belgian municipal elections of 2012, for which we collected data on 30 municipalities in the district of Leuven (in the Flemish region). We registered the declared campaign expenses for all the 172 lists and 3.632 candidates in these 30 municipalities. However,

many of these candidates cannot be considered 'serious contenders': their candidature is merely symbolical to support the party, they are not interested in holding local office and will arguably invest little in their campaign. Therefore, we only included candidates who already held office in the municipality or at a higher political level, as well as candidates with some level of media attention during the campaign. This group of 1.006 serious contenders (28.4% of all candidates) were included in our analysis.

The results show that the personal investment in the campaign does have an effect on the electoral result. Candidates who spend more in absolute terms or outspend their rivals (at the list and the municipality level) obtain a better result, even though the effect is small. We even found some traces of an effect of personal spending on the odds of obtaining a seat in the municipal council. This finding points at an intriguing difference with national elections in Belgium, where such an effect was not found. Winning a seat is obviously what matters most to a candidate. If a candidate can increase the number of preferential votes, but not to such an extent that he or she can capture a seat, the investment is useless. In this way, investing in the campaign can be considered as more effective for local than for national elections. At the same time, this result should not be overstated. The chances of obtaining a seat in Belgian municipal elections are still overwhelmingly determined by other parameters, such as the position on the list and the incumbency status of the candidate.

Indeed, holding any type of local or higher office increases the number of preferential votes. There are also indications that spending is less effective for candidates holding an executive office in the municipality (as mayor or alderman). Interestingly, holding higher office (i.e. regional and national MP, MEP, minister) has a smaller effect than important local offices such as mayor or alderman. These findings confirm that the result of local elections (at least with regard to preferential votes) is still largely determined by local dynamics, as it should be.

This post is based on the authors' full length article, '[Buying local votes: the effect of individual campaign spending under a semi-open PR system in the Belgian local elections](#)', published in *Local Government Studies*.

Gert-Jan Put is a researcher at the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO) affiliated to the KU Leuven Public Governance Institute, Belgium. His research interests include candidate selection, legislative turnover and campaign spending.



Bart Maddens is professor of political science at the KU Leuven Public Governance Institute, Belgium. His research focuses on political party finance and elections.

Jef Smulders is a researcher at the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO) affiliated to the KU Leuven Public Governance Institute, Belgium. His research interests mainly include party and campaign finance and political party

organization.



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